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MONTANA OUTDOORS

MUZZLE TO MUZZLE
GUN DOGS AT WORK

Profit-driven poachers are
MAKING A KILLING

A partnership for
WETLANDS

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PINE PREDATOR

To Alaska's Koyukon people, the marten is known as *sooga*, or "brother of the wolverine." For more on the furtive furbearer, see page 37. Photo by Dan and Cindy Hartman.

MONTANA OUTDOORS

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Letters

Can't fool a biology teacher

The May-June 2002 issue contains an article stating that rainbow trout are not native to Montana. I am a biology teacher and have taught my students that rainbows are native species in Montana. I inform them that rainbows are introduced in most streams but are native to the Kootenai River drainage. I obtained this information from the May-June 1981 issue of *Montana Outdoors*. Is this information now incorrect?

James D. Jones
Rapelje

JOSEPH TOMELLERI

Editor's reply: *Several alert readers wrote to chide us for what they considered an inconsistency in* Montana Outdoors*'s information on rainbow trout. According to Bob Snyder, FWP native fish species program manager, a sub-species of inland rainbow trout known as the redband trout (*O.m. gairdneri*) is indeed native to the Kootenai River drainage of Montana. "Personally, I view this as a native rainbow, but some biologists consider it a separate fish called the redband and limit the term 'rainbow trout' only to coastal forms," Snyder says. So yes, that particular 'rainbow' trout may be native, but the vast majority of rainbows in Montana, which are the coastal variety, are not. Until biologists come to some agreement, it appears there is no definitive answer to this one.*

He pays while others play

I enjoyed your article on the Smith River ("Rough ride on the Smith," March-April 2002). As a landowner on a Montana river (the Teton), I think it should be pointed out that even though a river runs through your land, and you pay property taxes on every square foot of it, you have no say as to what goes on—floating, fishing, etc. So while the recreationists are enjoying the river, the landowner is trying to make a living raising food for them.

Larry Maurer
Brady

To the zoo then

Concerning your article on wolves ("Will wolves wipe out elk?" July-August 2002): I was born and raised in Utica, Montana, before eventually settling in Oregon after my country sent me to fight in the Korean War. In the 1920s, my dad used to hunt all day and bring home nothing. After the state got rid of the wolves, the game came back. In my young years I had some of the best hunting ever in Montana. No matter what the biological studies show, a population of over 500 wolves in Montana will eventually wipe out the deer and elk.

Wolves have never been an endangered species. There are thousands of them in Canada and Alaska. People who want to see wolves can go to the zoo.

Chuck Waite
Harrisburg, Oregon

Think of the board feet!

Whete in Montana is the largest tree? I have a ponderosa pine on my ranch that is 12 feet 6 inches in circumference and stands about 100 feet tall.

Lud Gabrian
Red Lodge

Editor's reply: *That's a big tree, but not nearly big enough to match limbs with the state champion. According to Martin Flanagan, Montana coordinator for the national Champion Tree Project, the tallest ponderosa pine in the state is 194 feet high and 241 inches in circumference. That oversized evergreen grows in the Bitterroot Mountains in Lolo National Forest. Which Montana tree has the largest circumference? Records kept by the U.S. Forest Service show it's a plains cottonwood near Ravalli that has a base circumference of 411 inches, or 35 feet. It takes seven adults linking hands to encircle this portly cottonwood.*

We welcome your comments, questions, and letters to the editor. We'll edit letters as needed for accuracy, style, and length. Send your letter and a daytime phone number to: Montana Outdoors, P.O. Box 200701, Helena, MT 59620-0701. E-mail: tdickson@state.mt.us.

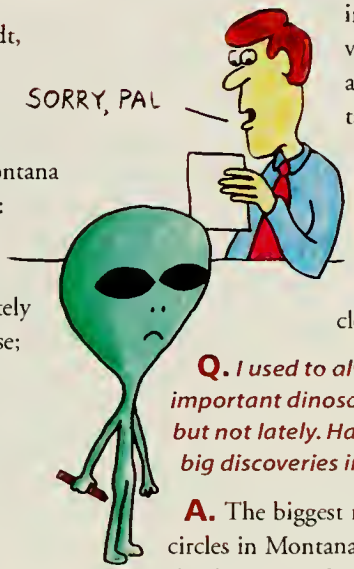
"Would you just LOOK at this mess! Tell me, were you born in a BARN?"

Natural Wonders

Q. *How long do you have to live in Montana to qualify for a resident license?*

A. According to Mark Earnhardt, FWP law enforcement program manager, living in Montana is only one of a number of requirements needed to qualify as a Montana resident. For example, you must:

1. have physically lived in Montana for at least six consecutive months immediately before you purchase the license;
2. have your vehicle registered in Montana;
3. not possess or have applied for resident hunting, fishing, or trapping privileges in another state or province other than Montana.



In addition, there are other legal requirements regarding your income tax status, voter status, etc. For additional details, contact your local game warden or call FWP Enforcement at (406) 444-2452 to get the name of the warden living closest to you.

Q. *I used to always read about important dinosaur finds in Montana, but not lately. Have there been any big discoveries in the past few years?*

A. The biggest news in paleontology circles in Montana and worldwide was the discovery of a 77-million-year-old baby brachylophosaurus, near Malta, in 2001. What makes the 32-foot-long duck-billed plant eater so fascinating is that conditions were such when it died that many of its tendons and muscles were preserved, allowing scientists a rare look at how dinosaurs appeared in the flesh. One of only a few mummified dinosaurs in the world, Leonardo (as it's called) can be viewed at the Phillips County Museum, (406) 654-1037.

Q. *How do I keep woodpeckers away from my house?*

A. These birds are looking for insects, and the three best ways to prevent this annoying habit are: 1. use toy plastic twirlers, reflecting tape, or other shiny, moving objects to scare the birds away; 2. place lightweight plastic bird-type netting (¾-inch) over the area, leaving at least 3 inches between the building and netting; or 3. place aluminum flashing over the pecked areas.

Our Point of View

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

MONTANA FWP

Will we have to end Bannack Days? Though the event is popular with tourists and residents, FWP may no longer be able to afford this annual celebration at Bannack State Park. The same is true with keeping park toilets clean and roads smooth, providing guided tours, staging family events, or even keeping some parks open. There's just not enough money to maintain state parks in the condition that visitors expect.

Montana has a wonderful system of state parks, ranging from Makoshika in the east to Flathead Lake in the northwest to historic Bannack in the southwest—plus 39 others in between. But demands on our parks are growing, as more visitors use them for camping, swimming, fishing, hiking, picnicking, and historical observation. Visitors expect clean and safe campsites, up-to-date interpretive signs, and functional recreational facilities. This demand is overstressing our park staff as well as our budget. For example, Tongue River Reservoir State Park saw 10,000 visitors over the Memorial Day weekend. The workload there is so overwhelming that we've had three caretakers quit at this one park in the past year.

Meanwhile, people want new state parks—especially in the state's northeastern region, where there are none. Local residents rightfully want to see a state park established there. Yet where will the money for this or other new parks come from?

Last year, Governor Martz established a Parks Futures Committee to look at the status of parks and their future needs. A recent committee report notes that state parks can't exist without tax support but urges FWP to make parks more self-sufficient. The committee also recognizes that state parks can't be run like businesses, though it wants them to be more businesslike.

The committee recommends new funding sources for Montana's state parks. Among the proposals: raise entrance and tour fees, or create a $4 surcharge on state license plates, which would allow any resident vehicle to enter parks free of charge.

Montana FWP is working to run state parks more effectively. We've streamlined management, improved customer service, and increased opportunities. However, considering the growing demands placed on our state parks, we can't keep them clean and functioning without additional funding.

The fate of Montana's state parks rests largely with you, our constituents, and with what you think should be done. I urge you to let us know your thoughts on this important issue.

—Jeff Hagener, Director

Montana Outdoors Report

No wonder the freezer keeps beeping

It's a sunny Saturday in early summer, and the North Fork Blackfoot River surges with melt from a late-June snow. Somewhere along a 30-mile reach of the raging river is trout number 17-28, which Sibley Malee-Ligas has been tracking for most of the morning. It's like looking for a contact lens in a county fairgrounds. Finally, at about 12:30 p.m., she locates the 15-inch-long cutthroat trout.

"It's right there under that tree," says the FWP biologist, pointing to a ponderosa pine leaning over a set of rapids.

Malee-Ligas found her fish using a radio receiver that picks up signals from a tiny transmitter surgically implanted in this and 29 other cutthroat and bull trout. The fish, ranging from 14 to 28 inches, were captured this past spring by FWP biologists. After they anesthetized the trout, the biologists surgically inserted transmitters before releasing the fish into the upper Blackfoot River upstream of Ovando.

TOM DICKSON

DOWN THERE SOMEWHERE: On the North Fork Blackfoot River, FWP fisheries technician Sibley Malee-Ligas finally locates trout number 17-28: "It's right there under that tree."

Ron Pierce, fisheries biologist at Missoula, is heading the research project. "What we're trying to learn is where native fish are going and what habitats they are using and not using," Pierce says. "Just by following their movements, we're learning a lot."

For example, the biologists have found that fish die from a range of causes. "From recent telemetry studies, we've found transmitters in osprey nests, in heron rookeries, and in otter dens," says Pierce. "We've also found fish that have been illegally taken by poachers."

Most of the tracking occurs streamside, when fisheries technicians such as Malee-Ligas identify individual trout by the fish's unique radio frequency. After locking onto a specific fish, she adjusts the receiver so that the closer she gets, the louder it beeps, until she knows right where the trout lies.

The biologists don't need to be close to water to find fish, however. "We can actually track them from airplanes," says Pierce.

Some of the 26 remaining trout (4 have been killed by predators so far this year) have surprised the fisheries biologists by heading all the way up to Copper Creek, 20 miles upstream of Lincoln, to spawn—a 60-mile journey.

"We're finding that these fish have very complex and rigorous migrations," says Pierce.

What will FWP do with the information being gathered by Pierce and other fish followers? "It helps us make good management decisions," he explains. "It helps us decide which tributary habitat we should focus on protecting or restoring."

Worse than the worm in tequila

Anglers and others interested in protecting Montana's waters have until September 15, 2002, to comment on a new draft management plan aimed at curbing the threat of aquatic nuisance species (ANS). Purple loosestrife, the New Zealand mud snail, the parasites that transmit whirling disease, and numerous other ANS have invaded Montana's lakes, rivers, streams, and wetlands, where they infect, kill, or crowd out native aquatic plants and animals.

Because the ANS problem is nationwide, federal law allows states to draw up plans to receive federal funds for controlling these invasive plants and animals. A group composed of private organizations and state and federal agencies recently completed a draft of Montana's ANS management plan. The plan's goal is to reduce the ecological, economic, and social damage caused by aquatic nuisance species.

Does the plan correctly identify the problems? Does it propose adequate solutions? You be the judge. Review the plan and make your comments known. The plan is available on-line at www.fwp.state.mt.us. Click on the Public Notice tab and then look in the Management Plan category. For more information, contact Tim Gallagher at (406) 444-2449 or tgallagher@state.mt.us.

LARRY MAYER/*BILLINGS GAZETTE*

NASTY LITTLE BUGGERS: The tiny New Zealand mud snail, just one of the many exotic organisms invading Montana's waters.

Even more marble-eyes coming soon to Fort Peck Reservoir

Break out the bottom bouncers and crankbaits; it won't be long before Fort Peck Lake is producing more walleyes than ever.

Already one of the West's premier walleye fisheries, the 240,000-acre impoundment of the Missouri River is getting a boost from a new $20 million warmwater fish hatchery scheduled to be built in Fort Peck.

Government officials and hundreds of anglers, local residents, and business owners gathered on July 6 for the hatchery groundbreaking.

"You wouldn't believe the turnout," says Jeff Hagener, FWP director, who attended the ceremony along with Senators Max Baucus and Conrad Burns, Congressman Denny Rehberg, Walleye Unlimited officials, and community leaders. "You can tell this is extremely important to the local community."

The hatchery is being built roughly one mile downstream from the dam near an area known as the Dredge Cuts. Projected to be finished in 2005, it will rear walleyes, smallmouth bass, and other warmwater sport species. The facility will also produce chinook salmon, which are stocked exclusively in Fort Peck Reservoir. Native species such as pallid sturgeon and sauger are also being considered.

The state's only other warmwater fish hatchery, in Miles City, is currently running at maximum capacity.

Initially funded by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the new facility will include 54 acres of rearing ponds, a main hatchery building, and a visitor's center with office space. When completed, the Corps will hand the hatchery over to Montana FWP. Because the agency lacks funds to operate and maintain the new hatchery, the Montana legislature passed a bill in 1999 that created a warmwater game fish stamp required of anglers who want to possess any warmwater fish caught in certain waters listed in the Montana fishing regulations.

JAN FINGER

WALLEYE PRODUCTION: To be completed in 2005, the new Fort Peck hatchery will rear walleyes and other popular sport fish.

SPARTASPHOTO.COM

HUNTING SEASON Openers

1 Sage grouse, sharp-tailed grouse, mountain grouse, partridge, mourning dove, wild turkey, common snipe, and upland birds for falconry

7 Archery deer, elk, and antelope

15 Backcountry deer and elk, bighorn sheep, moose, mountain goat, black bear

12 Pheasant (residents)

13 General antelope

14 Pheasant (nonresidents)

27 General deer and elk

Orphaned animals get a housing upgrade

Orphaned wildlife will have a much better place to recuperate, and visitors will learn far more about wildlife, at the new Montana Wildlife Rehabilitation Center in Helena, set to open this fall.

The center replaces FWP's outmoded animal shelter, built in 1965 as a short-term holding facility for injured wildlife. The old shelter lacked heat and proper sanitation, and its cages were too small.

"That way of housing wildlife is outdated," says the new center's director, Caryn Amacher.

Built with funds raised by Montana FWP, the Mikal Kellner Foundation for Animals, the FWP Foundation, and the U.S. Forest Service, the center will contain displays on wildlife biology and habitats. To reduce stress to the animals, the wildlife will not be displayed for public viewing, though Amacher says she plans to install a video camera that will show some animals on a monitor.

MONTANA OUTDOORS

SPIFFY NEW DIGS: Center Director Caryn Amacher will help host an open house at the new facility on September 7.

The Mikal Kellner Foundation for Animals and Montana FWP will jointly host an open house at the center on September 7, from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m.

"We won't have any wild animals at the open house," Amacher says. "But this will be a great chance for the public to see the facilities where they'll eventually be held."

For more information, call (406) 443-6532.

MONTANA OUTDOORS

Making a KILLING

How profit-driven poachers are plundering Montana's wildlife, and what enforcement officials are doing to shut them down

By Sam Curtis

It was a just a company perk. But unlike the ones most people might receive—say, a Christmas ham or ballgame tickets—this annual bonus was illegal. Provided to employees each fall, under Montana's big sky, the perk came from the CEO of a company in Illinois. During the summer, the employees would apply for their nonresident Montana hunting license. But if they forgot, or didn't get drawn, it didn't matter. The contact in Montana was paid well to take care of that. Once in the Treasure State, each employee could kill a trophy antelope, or two, or even three. The animals were then mounted by a taxidermist (one they knew could keep his mouth shut) who shipped the mounts back to Illinois so the employees could show off their "hunting" prowess. And the game wardens? Heck, they didn't suspect a thing.

MONTANA OUTDOORS

Illegal hunting—by nonresidents and residents—has been gaining momentum these days in Montana, a state so wealthy in wildlife resources that poachers (those who kill game animals illegally) get plenty of opportunities to shoot big trophies, make big money, and satisfy big egos.

THE BUCK STOPS HERE: Jim Kropp, head of Montana FWP's Enforcement Division, with seized antlers: "Poachers are targeting the biggest and best animals we have." Left: Poachers have killed everything from bald eagles to grizzly bears.

DUŠAN SMETANA

DUŠAN SMETANA

DONALD M. JONES

For hunters and others who prize wildlife, Montana's growing poaching problem means fewer large-racked animals to hunt or view. For state and federal enforcement officials, it means knowing that each year more people get away with a crime that's robbing law-abiding citizens of a highly valued public resource.

Poacher profile

Decades ago, when states first set hunting regulations, most poachers were poor, rural people trying to put food on the table. It was illegal, sure, but a deer or two potted out of season kept many a Montana family alive through the winter. That portrait, however, has changed.

"Poachers don't just go out and [illegally] shoot a deer for subsistence anymore," says Jim Kropp, chief of the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Enforcement Division. "Much poaching today is about trophies."

Which, due to the high price trophies command, means it's often about money. "You have Montanans out of work, or mayhe making only $15,000 a year, and they see hunters from out of state wheel in with big money," explains Jeff Darrah, FWP warden captain at Missoula. "They see an opportunity to supplement their income by getting those hunters a bull elk or some other trophy. You can go to just about any community in Montana and find somebody who will do that."

For example, last year in Glacier National Park, one poacher killed three bighorn sheep, and then pocketed $600 to $900 from trophy horn collectors for each head before special agents finally caught up with him.

More often, however, the money is made by criminals who provide opportunities and know-how for others to do the poaching—especially well-off out-of-staters. Operating out of Tom Miner Basin in southwestern Montana a few years ago, one poacher charged clients $3,000 to hunt a mountain lion, $1,200 for an antelope hunt, $600 to hunt a bobcat.... "The list was endless," says assistant U.S. attorney Kris McLean, who prosecutes federal poaching cases from his Missoula office. "If you had the money, he would take you out. It didn't matter if you had a license or not."

Who are these criminals lawlessly killing the public's game for private profit? "There is no poacher profile," says Doug Goessman, special agent with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). "Poachers include folks in their early 20s

DANIEL J. COX

BEAUTY AND THE BEAST: Montana's big game animals (above) enthrall residents and visitors alike with their aesthetic splendor, but poachers make bloody work of that wildlife scenery. Near right: Yellowstone National Park staff examine an elk poached and butchered in the park. Far right: Montana FWP game wardens prepare to auction game meat confiscated from poachers.

Sam Curtis is a freelance writer from Bozeman

DUŠAN SMETANA

DUŠAN SMETANA

DUŠAN SMETANA

ranging up into their 60s. And poaching crosses all social strata."

Many poachers in Montana run illegal operations out of this state and others. One, from Georgia, charged each of his clients from Georgia and South Carolina between $5,000 and $7,000 to shoot an antelope and a deer in Montana without a license. Last year, a Michigan poacher booked hunts from his home state and brought clients to Montana to kill mountain lions for $2,000 to $3,000 per cat. Again, "no license necessary."

GEORGE B. KIRSCH

And the poaching problem grows worse. Montana FWP has made more high-profile poaching arrests over the past 10 years than in any previous decade. State fish and game law violations of all types increased by 50 percent from 1980 to 2001. Goessman notes that it's hard for his office to document an increase in poaching activity, because some federal cases involve just a few individuals and others involve many.

"But I can tell you that we're definitely seeing more and more cases involving people paying for trophy animals," he says.

Illegal killing is also done by ordinary hunters succumbing to temptation. "That's the kind of day-to-day poaching that we run into," says FWP warden sergeant Mike Moore at Miles City. "Somebody sees an animal that excites him, he looks over both shoulders, and then he shoots it."

Called "opportunistic poaching," this illegal activity by our neighbors can occur at levels that surprise even hardened officials. Darrah tells of an extreme example when he and several other wardens set up antlered mule deer decoys in an area where they'd received complaints of poachers illegally shining spotlights on deer at night. "We had 10 vehicles come along, and every vehicle stopped and illegally shot at those decoys," says Darrah. "If those had been real bucks, there would have been 10 deer poached that night."

Though poachers rip off the public, many people still respond to the problem with a big "So what?" Montana has plenty of deer, not to mention elk and other wildlife, they say. What's the big deal if a few are nabbed under cover of darkness?

Wardens and other enforcement officials know how big a deal it is. When poachers kill 30 moose and leave them on the ground to rot, as documented in a single season in southwestern Montana, they understand that 30 moose are no longer available to wildlife watchers and law-abiding hunters.

"The opportunities to see the numbers of animals we've enjoyed in Montana are being reduced by these guys who think they can kill whatever they want," says McLean.

There's more. Poachers pluck prime animals from a herd, thus eliminating not only those specimens but also their trophy gene pool. "Poachers are targeting the biggest and the best animals we have," says Kropp.

And then there's the cost of investigating major poaching operations—a cost borne by lawful hunters from their license fees. A single recent case, which resulted in the conviction of 32 people on poaching charges, required 1,000 hours of work—

JEFFREY RICH

EVIDENCE BARED: Seized grizzly and black bear skulls and skins await examination at a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service forensics laboratory. State and federal agents say profit-driven poaching for bears and other big game is on the rise.

the equivalent of one warden's time and salary for half a year.

Darrah maintains that the greatest damage from poaching, however, is how it degrades Montana's hunting heritage. "When we catch somebody who shoots four moose or seven elk, and that makes the newspapers," he says, "people who don't hunt or don't approve of hunting say, 'Look, that's what hunters do.'" The result, Darrah contends, is more private land closed to public hunting and more of the nonhunting public soured on hunters and hunting.

Ego inflation

If money is the motivation for most poaching, what drives the money, according to McLean, are the inflated egos of status seekers accustomed to quick gratification, no matter what the price.

"You often get highly successful people who are type A personalities and are just used to getting what they want," says the federal prosecutor. "They feel they can do anything."

The incentive to poach can also be a cultural tradition, in which Dad shows the kids how to lay a rifle across the hood and shoot a deer at meadow's edge, illuminated by the headlights. "Hunter education is almost too late for some 12-year-olds," says Kropp. "They've already been taught by their parents to take the opportunity to poach."

Jim Posewitz, hunter ethicist and founder of Orion: The Hunters Institute, believes that increased poaching may be one manifestation of a recent trend toward commercial hunting, in which landowners lease large tracts of land to hunting clubs, outfitters, and wealthy hunters. Leasing, he maintains, makes it harder for poorer individuals to pursue legal hunting opportunities and makes illegal hunting more acceptable.

"If you look at the history of England, where people have treated wildlife as property attached to land, poaching was the number one crime for centuries," says Posewitz. "That may be an emerging issue in Montana, where people who lease land and lock it up are becoming the equivalent of the King's gamekeepers. As hunting opportunities become more difficult for the public to come by, I think the idea of poaching the 'King's deer' picks up a certain level of social acceptability."

Of course, some poaching is accidental, done by hunters who are either unable or unwilling to read or remember Montana's game laws. "But for the most part," says Moore, "these guys know what they're doing."

Stiff penalties

Whether someone poaches for profit, for personal aggrandizement, or simply out of ignorance, the penalties have grown increasingly stiff—particularly in Montana. Those found guilty of illegally shooting any deer lose their hunting privileges for three years and must pay the state a minimum of $500. For poaching trophy animals, Montana hits lawbreakers hard. A poacher recently convicted for killing a trophy bighorn sheep in the Elkhorn Mountains had to pay $30,000 in restitution to the state.

If a dead animal—trophy or otherwise—is transported across state lines, the sentence can be downright draconian. Giving or selling a license to somebody who kills an animal and then transports it out of Montana—a common violation—is considered a felony under the federal Lacey Act. Enacted in 1900 to prevent the widespread practice of killing and transporting game across the United States, the law currently imposes penalties of up to five years in prison and a $250,000 fine.

"Time and time again we hear from people indicted for violating the Lacey Act: 'Jeez, I didn't realize we were going to get in this much trouble,'" says Goessman. "Well, we're not back in the old days anymore, where you get caught by a warden and pay a couple of hundred dollars.

NEIL & MJ MISHLER

INTERNET AUCTION? One mule deer poacher told officials he planned to sell his trophies on Ebay. Right: National Park Service workers investigate a bull elk shot in Glacier National Park, where poachers fled before they could hack off the antlers.

The family that poaches together, pays together

It was a family affair. Grandpa, the kids, even some grandkids- -all from Monticello, a quiet farming community in central Minnesota—would head out to Montana each October to shoot deer on private land southeast of Miles City. Members of the clan had been visiting Montana for 40 years. Not hunting, though. Poaching. The poachers didn't want to pay for a buck tag.

"They'd come out and buy doe tags and then go home with some nice bucks," says Mike Moore, FWP warden sergeant at Miles City. The poachers tagged the deer with buck tags provided by the ranchers who owned the land where they hunted and camped. It went on like this for decades.

Then in the winter of 2001, one of the poachers had a family calendar produced at a local print shop. On one page were several of the big, ill-gotten muley trophies. Someone at the shop overheard something about the family "borrowing" buck licenses from rancher friends in eastern Montana. A call was made to Minnesota's Turn In Poachers hotline, and before long Moore and three other Montana wardens were booking a flight to Minneapolis.

Dubbed Operation Northstar, for Minnesota's nickname, the wardens worked with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Minnesota's state conservation officers to eventually net 47 illegal racks. "It had been going on a long time," Moore says. Total fines and restitution for the nine Minnesotans and three Montanans were over $25,000, and a total of more than 18 years of hunting privileges were revoked.

One item captured in the bust was a local newspaper article featuring the family's annual hunting trek to the Big Sky State. "It's just beautiful," one poacher was quoted as saying about Montana. "You can see forever," said another, who bragged that the family averaged about seven deer each year.

"Well that's what they used to average," says Moore. "A lot of them won't be hunting here—or in Minnesota—for a few years."

An added bonus to the case came when the wardens interviewed the family's local taxidermist, who insisted he'd never mounted any of the poached deer. Then, in passing, he boasted of several large muleys mounted in his shop. "He told us he'd taken them in Montana, that he hunted a lot here," Moore says. "When we got back we ran a check and found that he'd never drawn a buck tag here—never!"

The taxidermist has been charged with illegally shooting deer, and the case is still pending.

CONFISCATED CONTRABAND: In Operation Northstar, game wardens recently seized 47 illegal racks.

MONTANA FWP

Today, the stakes for poaching are very, very high."

For well-heeled poachers, however, even the larger state fines are merely pocket change and do little to deter illegal behavior. The Illinois CEO mentioned earlier was fined $15,000 for killing an overlimit and hunting without a license. But he makes $8 million to $12 million per year, according to Kropp.

"A $15,000 fine would set the average Montanan back a bit," says Kropp. "But to this guy, that's just a drop in the bucket, the cost of doing business."

If wealthy poachers don't mind writing a big check to the state, they do seem to notice when a conviction removes hunting privileges. For years, poachers convicted in one state could still buy a license and hunt in another, but no longer. Now, anyone caught hunting illegally in Montana will run up against the Interstate Wildlife Violators Compact, an agreement that calls for revoking hunting privileges in all of the 17 member states if a license is revoked in any one of the others. Moreover, a poacher convicted of a felony may lose the right to ever again carry a firearm.

Jail sentences also get poachers' attention. The outfitter who guided illegal hunts for the CEO and his employees ended up in jail for six months. For his role in the crime, the taxidermist spent six months under house arrest. "That gives them time to think about things," Kropp says.

Lawful hunters retaliate

Also helping the effort to send poachers packing are legal hunters, who have teamed up with wardens and other officials. The Montana Bowhunters Association, for example, helped persuade the Montana legislature to impose stiffer penalties for poaching. Reward money donated by the Foundation for North American Wild Sheep has helped apprehend bighorn sheep poachers. And the Montana Board of Outfitters has assisted FWP in apprehending unlicensed outfitters. In addition, regular hunters and nonhunters increasingly report poaching activities.

"Most of our larger investigations start with a single tip," says Moore. "It may be fairly general, not something we can take action on right away, but we'll start looking at outfitters records, taxidermists records, meat locker records, and license databases to see if something's suspicious. We get our Criminal Investigation Section (CIS) involved when we believe the only way we'll get anywhere is to send special investigators in."

The agency's undercover unit, the CIS has an impressive record of catching poachers that elude local wardens. Kevin Clader, unit leader, says his wardens keep a low profile, preferring to remain anonymous as they blend into the seedier side of Montana's outdoors.

MOLECULAR EVIDENCE: Forensics experts can now match DNA from blood and hair samples with DNA in evidence found on poachers' clothing or vehicles.

Undercover work is an age-old method of nabbing wrongdoers. But state and federal enforcement officials also employ technological advances in communications, computers, and forensics. Last year, for example, a man was apprehended after illegally collecting shed elk antlers on the Sun River Game Range before it opened to the public. Wardens had planted electronically marked antlers and gathered intelligence on suspicious vehicles parked near the game range.

"We discovered that one suspect lived in Corvallis, Montana," says Kropp. "So we jumped into a plane, flew over his house, and picked up signals being transmitted from the poached antlers. Then we obtained a search warrant."

Another case was something out of a TV crime show. A warden took blood samples from the site where a mountain lion had been illegally killed. A year later, when he entered a taxidermist's shop, the warden was stunned to see a photo of someone posing with a dead lion at the exact spot he'd taken the sample. The poacher was eventually apprehended when state forensics experts matched DNA from the blood sample with DNA of the mounted lion the man had in his house.

Such careful attention to detail has paid off recently by shutting down major poaching operations. One of the biggest, an undercover investigation in eastern Montana dubbed Operation Rosebud (for the county where it was held) recently resulted in the prosecution of 32 defendants (9 residents and 23 nonresidents), the seizure of 51 illegally killed animals, and the imposition of over $155,000 in fines, 15 years of federal probations, and 45 years of revoked hunting privileges. It was the biggest poaching bust in Montana history.

Many versus few

There are, however, big obstacles to fighting poachers in Montana. With only 70

WALL OF SHAME: Over the past decade, FWP wardens have made a record number of high-profile arrests. Shown here are the confiscated mounts and pelts from two of the biggest busts.

KAREN NICHOLS

HIDEOUT HEAVEN: Brian Sommers, game warden at Kalispell, flanked by his 2,400-square-mile work area: "There's so much land to cover that sometimes, when you catch a poacher, you have to wonder what else is going on over the next ridge."

field game wardens in the state, each one is responsible for roughly 2,000 square miles, an area the size of some small states. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is even more undermanned, with just three field agents for all of Montana.

"There are so many poachers and so few of us, that the possibility of getting caught is very remote," concedes Rick Branzell, USFWS special agent.

State wardens are also hamstrung, says McLean, by a recent court decision prohibiting them from going onto private property to look for violations without reasonable suspicion.

Moreover, poachers are growing increasingly sophisticated, employing two-way radios, computers, GPS units, and other technology to stay a step ahead of the law. Some even use the Internet to sell their ill-gotten gains. "In 2000 I worked a case where we caught three guys from Miles City who'd poached three big muley bucks," says Moore. "They told us they were planning to sell them on Ebay."

Officials note that it's difficult to document exactly how much the poaching problem in Montana has increased. But they do know that money always attracts illegality. And as the money attached to wildlife has increased, as it has in recent years, officials know that poaching activity has too.

What's more, adds McLean, "the poachers out there are killing more per man. It's not just poach one deer and take it home. It's poach ten."

That doesn't bode well for Montana's wildlife—not to mention law-abiding hunters and wildlife watchers and those entrusted with managing and protecting wild animals. The demand for trophy wildlife continues to grow. And the prices paid to bag one—legally or not—are also rising. Unfortunately, the money and manpower available to enforce Montana's game laws and maintain healthy wildlife populations haven't kept pace. "Given the current level of our resources," says Kropp, "we are not keeping up anymore." ■

If you suspect anyone of poaching, call TIP-MONT (800-847-6668). Rewards are given for arrests leading to convictions, and you may remain anonymous.

Spreading the wealth

By offering gifts of fish, game, and other natural bounty, we can share with others the experience and heritage of our life outdoors

By Alan Charles

Illustrations by Nora Wildgen

I doubted that my new neighbor had ever crouched among decoys while clouds of clamoring Canada geese hovered above her. Nor had she likely ever dreamed of eating one of these delectable birds. But I knew she appreciated the notion of wild geese, because she'd once mentioned she liked to hear them calling during her morning walks.

So I gave her a gift, one neighbor to another—me, an old-time Montana goose hunter, and her, a "new" Montanan, freshly arrived from California and eager to learn about Big Sky Country.

A few days later, she told me that she'd feasted on a home-cooked meal of roast goose and wild rice while listening to a tape of wild goose calls and thumbing through a field guide that explained the natural history of North American waterfowl. She couldn't have thanked me better.

Ask any hunter, angler, hiker, or other outdoor enthusiast why he or she goes afield, and most likely the answer will have to do with the experience itself, the magical moments spent outdoors. We often relive those times outdoors by preparing a meal of wild game or fish, opening a jar of home-canned wild berry jelly, or dusting off a souvenir river agate or shed antler.

N.W.

As good as those memories can be, they have even more meaning when shared with others. Giving someone a gift of nature's bounty offers an opportunity to pass on more than just a package of game meat or a jar of jelly. It's a chance to share the gathering experience itself, as well as some of the outdoor knowledge and heritage that we've acquired by spending time outdoors. The gift can say something not only about who we are, but also about why we do what we do.

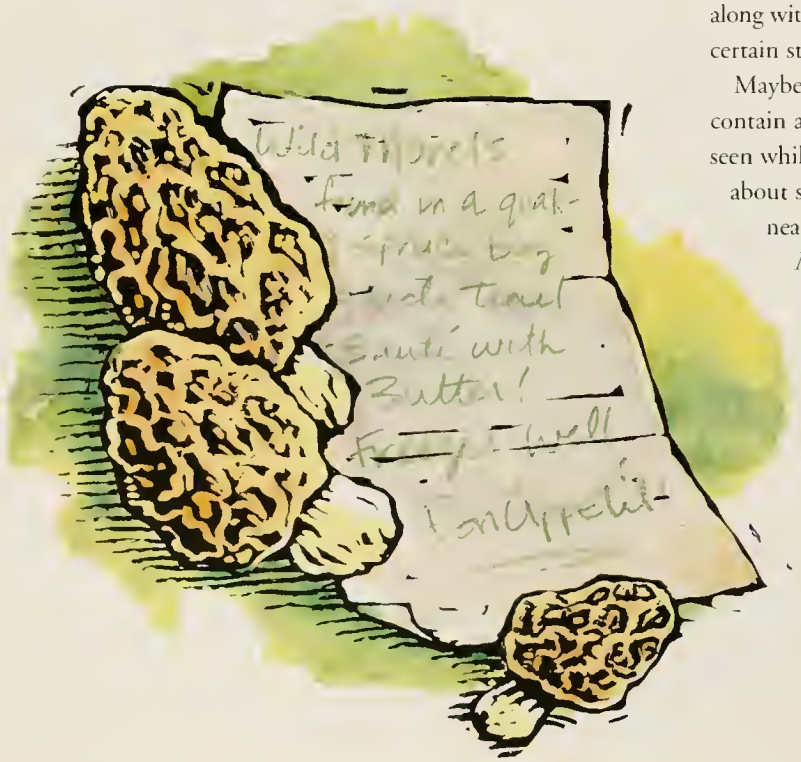
But giving people gifts of game or other natural resources should involve more than just dropping a sack of meat on their front stoop. To do it right requires forethought and effort. For instance, when I presented my neighbor with a freshly plucked wild goose, I also gave her one of my favorite recipes, so that she would know how to prepare the bird. And I included a package of wild rice, two oranges, and a bottle of wine, so that she could properly complement the unfamiliar wild meat. I also gave her a tape that explained the different sounds geese make, and a book about waterfowl, so that she could learn more about these wild birds. Finally, I tucked in the basket a snapshot of my puppy retrieving a goose, to share with her a moment of the hunt itself.

The sharing tradition runs deep through the culture of hunters and gatherers. Nature's gifts have great value, partly because they are difficult to obtain but also because they are so often unique. Many people especially value gifts indigenous to a particular area. A western Montana hunter traveling to eastern

Montana might bring jars of huckleberry jam as gifts for landowners who allow access, while an eastern Montana angler might pack jars of paddlefish caviar or smoked sturgeon in the camp box to share with friends on a western Montana trout fishing trip.

And the more care that goes into the gift, the more significance it imparts. A package of elk meat might be annotated with notes chronicling the annual life cycle of a bull elk, or complemented with elk hair trout flies tucked in the package along with suggestions on where and when to use the flies on a certain stream during times when nearby bull elk are bugling.

Maybe a basket of freshly gathered wild asparagus could contain a brief listing of all the various wild animals and birds seen while the asparagus was gathered, accompanied by a note about some historical or archeological event that occurred near the gathering area *(May 11, 2002: East of Terry, Montana, junction of Powder River and Yellowstone River: Sturgeon rolling in rising muddy water, paddlefish being caught below Intake. Saw rooster pheasants crowing, first antelope doe with fawn, two white-tailed deer with fawns, numerous turkey gobblers and hens in the river bottom cottonwoods, beavers felling many trees along the Powder River. One of the Seventh Cavalry soldiers wounded in the Battle of the Bighorn, 1876, is buried here; location with historical note marked with a plaque.).*



Alan Charles coordinates landowner/sportsman relations for Montana FWP.

Our outdoor moments are unique, and our outdoor gifts can be equally so.

A jar of pickled fish might be cached in a fish-shaped basket that also contains a recipe, a brochure explaining the natural history of the fish species, and fishing tips (including sample lures) that describe how, where, and when to catch similar fish.

The possibilities are as endless as the abundance of Montana's natural bounty and the imagination and generosity of those giving the gifts.

While many anglers and hunters use nature's gifts to say thanks to landowners who open their gates, sharing the bounty is also an excellent way to interest a homebody in the outdoors. Maybe it's someone who grew up in a city and was never introduced to outdoors life. Or maybe it's someone who once enjoyed the outdoors but, due to age or other reasons, can no longer participate in those activities.

Tailoring the gift to the recipient is important. For instance, I would never offer a simple package of deer meat to someone I suspected had grown up on a steady diet of pan-fried venison. Instead, I might prepare some smoked venison, garnish it with a special homemade sauce, and add a list of little-known facts about deer that I thought the person might find interesting.

Or I might offer an elderly hunter a particularly choice cut of uncooked elk and package it with a favorite beverage, a souvenir from my hunt, and some notes about the history of elk in the area where I hunted.

Photographs compiled by a hiker might be parceled out with mementos gathered on the trip. Perhaps a package of dried morel mushrooms could include a scenic photo from the area where they were gathered, along with an explanation about how to identify wild mushrooms, tips for locating the best ones for eating, and ideas regarding proper preparation.

A jar of chokecherry jelly might be nestled in a box of autumn-tanned leaves and other vegetation unique to the area, with an image of a bear track traced on the top of the box and a note describing what it felt like to gather berries in the bear's backyard.

Sharing such intangibles of an outdoor experience is challenging, but the effort is worthwhile. Only someone who has closely seen a rooster pheasant, a wild turkey, a gaudy pintail duck, or a chunky little Hungarian partridge can truly appreciate the vivid colors and intricate patterns of these birds' plumages. Only those who have felt the flank of an antelope can know the unique touch and texture of this animal's hollow hair. These are the experiences we can share with others when we give gifts from nature. A goose quill ink pen, a turkey tail duster, ornamental feather hatpins, hand-tied lures, and homemade decorations are all ways to share not only nature's bounty but also our appreciation for nature's wonder.

Often it's the simple, unadorned things that are most evocative. A pair of pine cones, a sun-dried bone, a single feather, clumps of dried grass, river rocks smoothed by eons of current—these can add texture to a gift and help convey the experience of gathering it.

Our outdoor moments are unique, and our outdoor gifts can be equally so. Sharing the fruits of our recreation is one way we can share with others the magic of our moments spent hiking, hunting, and fishing in Montana's great outdoors. With a little imagination, we can weave into our gifts the sights and sounds of what we experienced, along with the outdoor knowledge and heritage that frame our moments afield. ■

LABRADOR RETRIEVER BY DENVER PYLE/NWA, DENVERBRFA.COM

Gun Dogs

ENGLISH SETTER BY WWW.PETERBECK.COM

BY DAVE BOOKS

BLACK, YELLOW AND CHOCOLATE LABRADOR RETRIEVERS BY DUŠAN SMETANA

Retrievers

Dogs have helped us with chores since sometime around 7,000 B.C., starting perhaps when a lonely caveman lured a wild dog close to the fire with a piece of cooked meat and then kept the mutt around to growl at intruders. Today, dogs also herd livestock, assist the disabled, find lost persons, and sniff out illegal drugs. They also help us hunt birds—a partnership dating back 400 years. Gun dogs come in many breeds and types, but most fall into one of two categories: retrievers and pointers.

Retrievers are big, strong dogs with thick, oily coats that withstand the cold water and harsh weather of late autumn, when waterfowl funnel south. Labrador retrievers, golden retrievers, and Chesapeake Bay retrievers are the most popular, although other breeds have their devotees.

CHESAPEAKE BAY RETRIEVER BY DENVER BRYAN

GOLDEN RETRIEVER BY DENVER BRYAN

LABRADOR RETRIEVER BY DENVER BRYAN

LABRADOR RETRIEVER BY DENVER BRYAN

Intelligent and intense, retrievers sit and watch until a duck or goose is downed. Then they plunge into the water on command and swim to the bird, sometimes following hand signals. They love water. Oh, do they love water.

Dave Books is editor emeritus of Montana Outdoors

YELLOW LABRADOR RETRIEVER BY DENVER BRYAN

GERMAN WIREHAIR POINTER
BY WWW.SPARTASPHOTO.COM

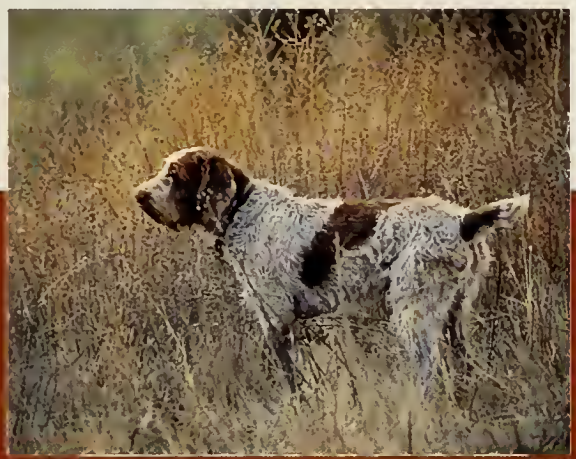
ENGLISH SETTER BY CAUSAN SMETANA

Pointers

ENGLISH SETTER AND ENGLISH POINTER BY DENVER BRYAN

Often racing at full throttle, pointers range in search of pheasants, grouse, or partridge until they strike scent. Then they screech to a halt and aim their muzzle at the hidden prey. English setters and Brittanies are popular in Montana, as are German shorthairs, German wirehairs, and English pointers. They are taught to "hold their point" (not move) until the hunter walks up and flushes the birds (hence the attribute "steady to wing"). They too retrieve, but not with the intensity and style of a Lab or golden. Pointers love to run. Boy, do they love to run.

BRITTANY BY DENVER BRYAN



ITALIAN SPINONE BY JUDITH E. STROM

GOLDEN RETRIEVER BY DENVER BRYAN

Good Dog

Loyal and devoted, gun dogs live to hunt. And once afield, they don't know what it means to quit. Whether ferreting out a downed mallard in an acre of mud and cattails, or locking up on a covey of Huns in a tawny expanse of prairie, gun dogs will give it their all until the sun drops below the horizon.

YELLOW LABRADOR RETRIEVER BY DENVER BRYAN

YELLOW LABRADOR RETRIEVER BY DENVER BRYAN

LABRADOR RETRIEVER PUPPY BY DENVER BRYAN

Gun dogs speak volumes with their eyes. They also say a thing or two with their tails.

ENGLISH SPRINGER SPANIEL BY DENVER BRYAN

YELLOW LABRADOR RETRIEVER BY DENVER BRYAN

No matter how they communicate, gun dogs will always express absolute joy on those mornings when you put your gun in the truck, drop the tailgate, and say those two magic words: "Kennel up!"

YELLOW LABRADOR RETRIEVERS BY DENVER BRYAN

SAVING MONTANA'S WE

Beneficial to wildlife and water quality, wetlands are in trouble. How an innovative partnership came to their aid...

Cindy Kittredge cares strongly about history, family, and land. So it comes as no surprise to learn that she and her husband, Jim, have spent the past seven years working to restore a historic wetland on her family's 2,500-acre ranch, located 25 miles southwest of Great Falls. Her father, born and raised nearby, began farming the property in the 1920s.

"Dad took good care of this land," says Cindy Kittredge, who also heads the Cascade County Historical Society. "He didn't try to control it, to make it do what it couldn't. When Jim and I moved out to the ranch, we wanted to do the same."

It wasn't easy. The ranch had begun to languish in the mid-1980's, after Cindy's father stopped farming. Leased cattle overgrazed pastures. Leafy spurge and

TLANDS LEGACY

By Tom Dickson

YELLOWSTONE RIVER FLOODPLAIN COTTONWOODS BY DUŠAN SMETANA

other harmful exotic plants invaded fields, crowding out native grasses. Perhaps most alarming to the Kittredges, who moved there in 1996, was the loss of water in a 119-acre oxbow wetland. There, as a girl, Cindy had watched ducks, shorebirds, sandhill cranes, frogs, muskrats, and other water-loving wildlife. "You wouldn't believe how beautiful this was back then," she says. Now the wetland sits dry for most of the year.

At first, the couple worked on their own, using imported sheep to control leafy spurge and rotational grazing to feed cattle without denuding pastures. But restoring so much property to its natural function, while at the same time running a working ranch, took more money and time than the Kittredges alone could muster. So they brought in outsiders—biologists, archeologists, geologists, state officials, and anyone else who also saw the ecological potential of the rich, spring-laced property. One of the many invited to the ranch was Tom Hinz, a Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) wildlife biologist.

"I could see that their wetland was part of the legacy of wetlands in this part of Montana," he says. "It seemed well worth restoring."

Over the next few years, FWP and several conservation groups—among them the American Bird Conservancy, American Public Land Exchange, Ducks Unlimited, and the Montana Conservation Corps—helped the ranching couple fence livestock from the water's edge and plant young willows and cottonwoods. They also helped the Kittredges apply for a federal North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA) grant. Still pending, the grant would purchase a conservation easement that would forever protect the property from development.

The shining conservation achievement, however, would be restoring the large wetland. To that end, the Kittredges and several conservation groups recently applied for funds to build a water-control structure that would help the couple retain water in the basin. If all goes according to plan, sandhill cranes, shorebirds, and other wildlife will once again be able to use the shallow lake for much of the year.

Central to the Kittredge's potential wetland restoration—and dozens of others across the state—is the Montana Wetlands Legacy. Begun in 2000 to help stem the loss of Montana's wet areas, the legacy is a partnership of 30-plus organizations, agencies, and businesses working with hundreds of landowners and other citizens. The partnership's ambitious goal is to conserve, by 2005, an additional 250,000 acres of Montana wetlands, riparian (streamside) areas, and nearby uplands that would not otherwise be restored or protected.

The legacy is not a typical wetland conservation program. "What we are," says Hinz, who coordinates the initiative on behalf of the member organizations and citizens, "is a voluntary, incentive-based

THE WORLD IN A TREE: One-third of Montana's bird species use cottonwoods, which thrive in floodplain wetlands adjacent to rivers. For example, bald eagles and great blue herons nest in high branches, black-headed grosbeaks use the brushy understory, and hermit thrushes nest on the ground beneath the towering trees.

Tom Dickson is editor of Montana Outdoors

JOHN R. FORD

MALLARD MAKERS: Prairie pothole marshes are wetlands commonly known for producing waterfowl, particularly puddle ducks. They also absorb spring runoff and filter sediment and pollutants.

pattnership that brings people and funding sources together to protect wetlands and riparian areas."

Nor is Hinz your typical wetland conservation program coordinator. He works as a catalyst to create various pattnerships among a wide range of groups and individuals working to conserve Montana's valuable wetlands. He also provides advice on applying for grants, and he helps citizens and organizations learn why wetlands need protection and where to find funding to protect those most severely threatened.

Clean, abundant water

Most people, if they think of wetlands at all, imagine a reed-ringed marsh where mallards paddle. But a wetland is actually any area covered by shallow water, or containing waterlogged soils, that grows water-loving plants. Montana contains a wide range of wetlands, from peatland fens in the northwest to prairie potholes north of the Hi-Line, and from marshes along tributaries of Flathead Lake to the floodplain wetlands bordering the Missouri, Yellowstone, and other rivers.

Because these spongy areas store and purify water, essential to all life, scientists consider wetlands among the most important ecological components of Montana's landscape. "Wetlands safeguard Montana's supply of clean water," says Hinz. "In a state like ours, where droughts can go on for years and where people are increasingly fighting for scarce water resources, they're especially important."

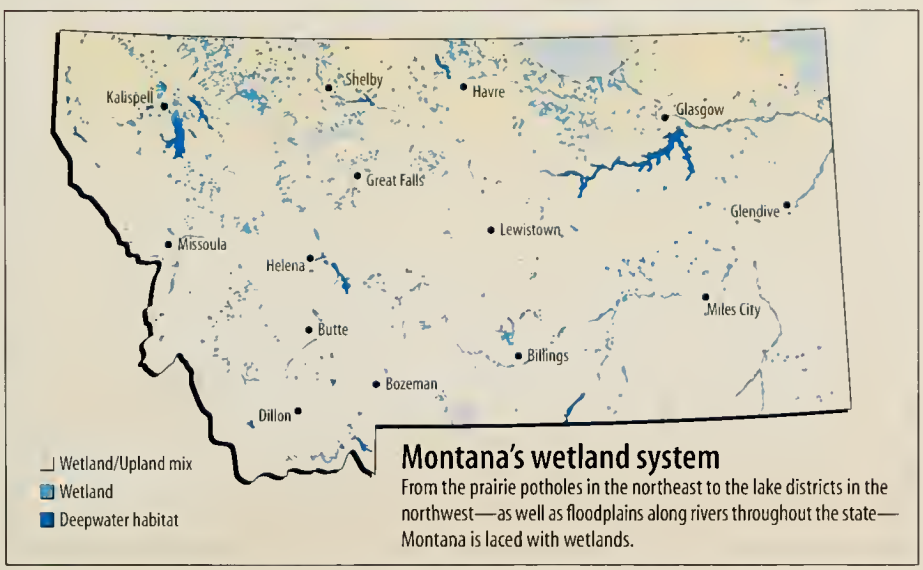
In addition, wetlands help reduce severe flooding by absorbing spring runoff like a sponge, and then meting it out throughout the year. They also provide habitat for fish and wildlife (including rare species such as whooping cranes), provide places for recreation such as hunting and bird watching, and add beauty to the landscape.

"These are places we take our families, where we hunt, fish, watch wildlife, and spend leisure time," says Hinz.

Wetlands also have utilitarian value, notes Jim Kittredge, pointing to the wetland he and his wife hope to restore and the alfalfa fields that surround it. "When that was full of water, it sub-irrigated the alfalfa during dry periods," he says. "So there aren't just wildlife benefits from restored wetlands. They also have direct benefits to farming."

Some of Montana's most ecologically important wetlands sit in the state's driest region. Northern Montana east of the Rockies and north of the Hi-Line makes up the southwestern fringe of North America's 300,000-square-mile Prairie Pothole Region, one of the most biologically rich landscapes on the continent. The region was formed by retreating glaciers leaving behind building-sized chunks of ice covered in dirt and rock. When the ice melted 12,000 years ago, the land sank into shallow depressions that pooled with water.

In April and May, just as hungry migrating shorebirds and puddle ducks arrive needing fuel for energy and egg-laying, a



Montana's wetland system

From the prairie potholes in the northeast to the lake districts in the northwest—as well as floodplains along rivers throughout the state—Montana is laced with wetlands.

MONTANA OUTDOORS/ USFWS

SPARTASPHOTO.COM

A ROCK-LINED CHANNEL? Though riprap helps keep floodwaters out of new river homes, like these on the Yellowstone, it also disrupts the natural processes needed to restore floodplain wetlands.

pothole's waters warm quickly in the spring sun, filling with a rich stew of high-protein bird food such as midges, snails, fairy shrimp, and other invertebrates.

"The invertebrates provide calcium that's particularly important for egg formation," says Randy Renner, Ducks Unlimited regional biologist for Montana. Although Montana's potholes aren't nearly as numerous as those in North Dakota or Saskatchewan, they still produce prodigious numbers of waterfowl and shorebirds. "The potholes in northern Blaine and Phillips counties can have some of the highest pintail [duck] densities in North America," Renner says.

Floodplain wetlands

Though a pothole more closely resembles the traditional portrait of a wetland, Hinz notes that the top priorities for the legacy partnership are actually floodplain wetlands along rivers: the Missouri, the lower Flathead, the Madison-Missouri corridor, and especially the Yellowstone.

"A lot of these rivers look okay," says Hinz, "but insidious changes are affecting how they function and, in turn, their ability to supply clean water."

Rivers need to flood occasionally. The high water scours pools and spills into adjacent flat, wooded areas—the floodplain—where it stands for several weeks, seeping down to recharge groundwater sources. The water also regenerates ecologically important shoreline vegetation, especially cottonwoods. Though cottonwood communities comprise less than one percent of Montana's bird habitat, one-third of the bird species in the state use cottonwoods or their understory, says Janet Ellis, program director for Montana Audubon. For example, great blue herons and bald eagles nest in high branches, black-headed grosbeaks use the brushy understory, and thrushes nest on the ground below the towering trees.

"If we lose our cottonwoods," Ellis says, "many birds will be in trouble."

Cottonwoods require river flooding to reproduce. When the water overflows riverbanks, it deposits fine, silty soil on sand and gravel bars. In late spring, as the floodwaters recede, mature cottonwoods begin releasing seeds that blow onto the wet, newly deposited soil, where they germinate in the warm summer sun.

On rivers such as the Missouri, where dams hold back floodwaters, and rocky riprap and dikes keep the water contained between banks, young cottonwoods are now scarce. A 1989 federal Bureau of Land Management study along the Missouri, from Fort Benton downstream 150 miles, found that for every 100 existing mature cottonwoods, only 80 new young ones were growing. At that rate, the river stretch will lose one-quarter of its cottonwoods over the next 50 years. In comparison, floodplains of ecologically healthy rivers such as the undammed Yellowstone contain, in some places, cottonwood saplings thick as hairs on a dog.

"On the Yellowstone you'll see cottonwoods of a dozen or more ages, representing the various floods over the past decades," says Burt Williams, southeastern Montana project manager for The Nature Conservancy, a nonprofit land conservation organization.

It's no surprise that floods are the biggest threat to people who build in floodplains. Yet the biggest threat to healthy riparian floodplain wetlands are dams, dikes, and levees built to prevent flooding. Other wetland types similarly suffer from often-necessary or inevitable human intervention. They are drained to provide fertile farmland or pasture; filled with dirt to build homes and stores; or polluted with pesticides, herbicides, fertilizers, and other runoff from surrounding

Montana WETLANDS LEGACY

Many hands make Montana wetlands conservation work

Montana Wetlands Legacy coordinator Tom Hinz describes the initiative as a "partnership," comprising hundreds of concerned landowners and other citizens and more than two dozen organizational partners, including

- American Bird Conservancy
- American Public Land Exchange
- American Rivers
- Aquatic Design and Construction
- Ducks Unlimited, Inc.
- Five Valleys Land Trust
- Flathead Land Trust
- Gallatin Valley Land Trust
- Montana Audubon
- Montana Conservation Corps
- Montana Department of Environmental Quality
- Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation
- Montana Department of Transportation
- Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
- Montana Natural Heritage Program
- Montana Natural History Center
- Montana WaterCourse
- Pheasants Forever
- PPL Montana
- River Network
- Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation
- The Conservation Fund
- The Nature Conservancy
- The Trust for Public Land
- U.S. Bureau of Land Management
- U.S. Bureau of Reclamation
- U.S.D.A. Forest Service
- U.S.D.A. Natural Resources Conservation Service
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

TOM DICKSON

A SENSE OF PLACE: Jim and Cindy Kittredge on their ranch, overlooking the wetland they aim to restore: "Landscapes shape the people who live within them," says Cindy. "They help define who we are."

towns, roads, and farms. According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Montana has lost 27 percent of its wetlands since European settlement. And the loss continues, despite several state and federal laws designed to save them—not to mention federal funding programs, the work of conservation groups such as Ducks Unlimited, and a state migratory bird hunting stamp program begun in 1986 to raise wetland protection dollars.

"What's been missing," says Hinz, "has been some sort of coordinating effort to increase awareness among landowners and groups to help them raise money to conserve Montana's wetlands. That's where I come in."

Flathead wetland conservation

One example of the Montana Wetlands Legacy in action is the $2.5 million Weaver Slough Conservation Easement Project, which protects 1,200 acres along the Flathead River east of Kalispell. Included in the restoration are 150 acres of riparian wetlands and 200 acres of open water oxbow lake. Wildlife species such as nesting ospreys and bald eagles, pileated woodpeckers, river otters, and white-tailed deer will benefit from the protected habitats.

Susan How, project director for the Flathead Land Trust, says wetlands are increasingly drained to build new homes in fast-growing Flathead County.

"We wanted to secure easements before the land along the river was developed," she says.

The wetland easements will also help maintain good water quality in Flathead Lake. Excess nutrients such as yard and crop fertilizer that enter a lake via streams and rivers can fuel blooms of algae, which eventually die. When decomposing, the tiny plants consume oxygen needed by fish and aquatic insects that fuel the underwater food chain.

"Wetlands are crucial to Flathead Lake, because they filter out nutrients before they can get into the Stillwater, Whitefish, and Flathead rivers, which flow into the lake," says Robin Steinkraus, executive director of a local conservation group called Flathead Lakers.

Just as a single wetland can purify water, provide wildlife habitat, and reduce flooding, so has the wetlands legacy partnership accomplished much with little. Its budget only covers Hinz's salary and $20,000 per year in minor expenses such as printing. Yet in just two years the initiative has helped garner roughly $20 million in wetland project funding that might have been missed. One of the big money sources Hinz has been targeting is the North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA), which grants $20 million to $40 million per year for wetland projects nationwide.

"Before we started this partnership, Montana just wasn't applying for its share of that money like it could have been," says Hinz. "We've substantially increased our annual applications, which means we're getting more NAWCA grants for Montana wetland projects."

That good news notwithstanding, wetland proponents note that it will take more than just funding to protect Montana's remaining wetlands. Most harmful to floodplain wetlands along the Yellowstone River—and other major Montana rivers—is new home construction and the accompanying riprap and dikes that keep floods at bay. Though most of the Yellowstone still remains natural, bank armoring has boomed since the record floods of 1996 and 1997.

According to Williams, of The Nature Conservancy, 40 percent of the Yellowstone from Laurel to Billings now contains fortified banks. "That's really starting to have a profound effect on the river," says Williams. One river stretch of the Yellowstone near Billings has deepened and narrowed from an average of 8 feet deep and one-half mile wide to 30 feet deep and just half the width. Too much bank fortification could eventually turn the wild, free-flowing river into a rock-lined canal.

More than just cottonwoods are lost by such development, says Cindy Kittredge. She believes that the loss of healthy landscapes can actually diminish the very self-identity of the people who live nearby.

"Landscapes shape the people who live within them," Kittredge says. "They help define who we are. Healthy landscapes remind those of us in rural areas that we have a strong identity that's closely and intelligently attuned to the land and the workings of nature." ■

Want to help Montana's wetlands? Hinz says landowners can protect river and stream habitats on their property through a variety of state and federal programs. Others can get involved with any of the groups in the sidebar at left to help raise funds for wetland protection and restoration projects. To learn more, call Hinz at (406) 994-7889.

Enough already?

Both residents and nonresidents are feeling the pain as Montana attracts increasing numbers of out-of-state hunters, anglers, and other recreationists

By Tom Dickson

MONTANA OUTDOORS

FOR MORE than a decade, Ross Jenkins would spend summers dreaming of his upcoming hunt in southeastern Montana. Come October, the Ohio fireman and other family members would drive 1,400 miles to Broadus, where they camped on private land and hunted deer. A trip highlight was a perch fry put on by the Buckeye hunters for the Montana ranchers who welcomed them each fall.

"We just loved coming to Montana," says Jenkins, who's been hunting here since 1989.

Not anymore. "When I saw that the price [for a nonresident combination hunting license] had gone up to $638 this year, that was the final nail in the coffin," Jenkins explains. "I'm not a rich man, and what Montana is saying to people like me is that we're not welcome."

Steve Ortez feels unwelcome too, but for entirely different reasons. The Great Falls construction worker says access to pheasant spots he's been hunting since a teen has dried up. Doors once open are now closed. "Leased land" signs are popping up more frequently.

"It used to be you could go up to a landowner's house, knock on the door, and nine out of ten times get permission to hunt," Ortez says. "Now you go up and find out he's leased it to a bunch of out-of-staters, and us local guys are just out of luck."

Both Jenkins and Ortez are feeling the pain of a problem that shows no signs of relenting. In growing numbers, nonresidents are flocking to the Treasure State to hunt, fish, raft, hike, and otherwise enjoy the natural splendor that makes Montana famous. The growing influx of out-of-staters generates millions of dollars in revenue for the financially strapped state, but it also causes crowding and loss of access and is partly responsible for increasing nonresident hunting license fees. Unfortunately, easy solutions to the problem are as rare as a solitary midsummer float down the Clark Fork River.

Tourism boom

As traditional extractive industries such as mining and forestry languish, Montana increasingly relies on tourism to bolster its economy. In 2001, 9.6 million people visited Montana, up more than 2 million from 1991. As anyone who spends time outdoors can attest, a share of that growth occurred on the state's hunting lands and fishing rivers. From 1990 to 2000, appli-

cations for nonresident combination hunting licenses grew over 50 percent, from 29,000 to 45,000, while out-of-state fishing licenses climbed 25 percent during that time, from 160,000 to 200,000.

The problem with more visitors, even in a state as big as Montana, is that they show up where regulars—resident and otherwise—have grown accustomed to solitude. That's been the case on southwestern Montana's Beaverhead and Big Hole rivers. Long known by locals for their phenomenal trout fishing, the rivers were "discovered" by the sporting press in the 1980s and 1990s. Word quickly spread nationwide. Soon the waters were inundated with drift boats, which allowed the mostly nonresident angler clientele to cover miles of water in search of prime riffles and runs. From 1995 to 1997, angling pressure on the Beaverhead more than doubled.

"This is a big state, and there's no reason local people should have to 'take a number' when it comes to hunting and fishing here."

—Steve Ortez, construction worker, Great Falls

"It got to the point," says Dick Oswald, FWP fisheries biologist at Dillon, "that on many days you'd float along and at every popular pool or riffle there would be at least two or three guys standing there, fishing away."

Other rivers have also been flooded with anglers, many arriving from distant locales. Anglers, mainly locals, complain of overcrowding on the Blackfoot, the upper Yellowstone, the Missouri below Holter Dam, and, worst of all, the upper Bighorn. "We call it 'combat fishing,'" says Dr. William Smoot of Bozeman, who has been fishing the storied trout river for 30 years. "I've seen as many as 40 boats at one time in the first quarter-mile of the river."

And it's not just rivers. Hunters—resident and nonresident—point to overcrowded campsites and hunting lands, particularly those that pheasants frequent. "It was just getting out of control," says Stan Meyer, chairman of the FWP Commission from 1994 to 1998, of public upland hunting land overuse by out-of-staters in the early 1990s. "There'd be

PAUL UPDIKE

COMBAT FISHING: Anglers in boats and afoot jockey for prime position on the Beaverhead River. Equally crowded, say local anglers, are the Bighorn, Big Hole, and Yellowstone rivers.

three or four guys camped out on a public area, with three or four dogs, and after a few days they'd just clean out the birds."

The crowded conditions and lack of pheasants, Meyer contends, were in part responsible for many resident hunters retiring from the sport. From 1980 to 2000, resident bird hunting licenses declined by 50 percent, while nonresident licenses more than doubled.

"When we lose local hunters," says Meyer, "we lose the moral commitment to supporting FWP, to supporting habitat and conservation."

Granted, Montana residents too are leasing land, crowding parking areas, and clogging casting lanes. In fact, despite the notion that nonresidents are "overrunning" state hunting and fishing areas, out-of-staters make up only 43 percent of the total number of participants. But the perception among many Montana residents is that non-Montanans are the main problem.

"I don't mind paying my fair share for a nonresident license. But where it's at now, I feel like Montana is ripping us off."

—Howard Egger, retired truck driver, Pennsylvania

Montana's response

How have state officials responded to the growth in nonresident recreational use? For many, it's been with gratitude. The nearly 10 million travelers who visited Montana in 2001 spent $1.7 billion, making tourism one of the state's most lucrative industries, second only to agriculture. According to the Montana Department of Commerce, nonresident travel directly and indirectly supports 32,000 jobs.

"Tourism is a hugely significant factor in the state," says Betsy Baumgart, administrator of the Commerce Department's Montana Promotion Division.

Of all state agencies, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) benefits most from the Ohio trout angler and Iowa elk hunter who show up each year. "More than two-thirds of our budget comes from nonresident hunting and fishing fees," says Chris Smith, Montana FWP chief of staff. "Until this year, our Block Management hunter access program was funded entirely by nonresident licenses. We need both resident and nonresident license fees to keep this agency afloat."

And the state continues to find ways to derive additional revenue from tourists. A lodging tax imposed in 1987 generates funds used for touting the state's charms in major markets such as Seattle, and for small Montana communities to promote themselves. Proposals at the recent special legislative session included increasing the lodging tax and adding new tourist taxes.

As is the case with states nationwide, Montana charges nonresidents more for fishing and hunting licenses than it does those who live here. And it raised nonresident fees (though not resident ones) beginning with the 2002 season. A hunter living in Shelby who wants to buy a conservation license (elk, deer, upland game birds, and fishing) pays only $54, while a Milwaukee hunter must now pay $638.

FWP officials point out that the recent nonresident fee increase puts Montana in line with nonresident license fees charged

JEFF HENRY

HUNT FOR PARKING: Elk hunters and outfitters fill an access site at Daisy Pass in the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness.

Tom Dickson is editor of Montana Outdoors.

in nearby states. But that doesn't make it fair, say nonresidents, who argue that nonresident rates in all western states continue to be far too high.

Unfortunately for Montana's nonresident hunters and anglers, there's not much they can do about it. They don't vote here. And as long as demand for Montana licenses stays high, the state can continue to raise nonresident fees.

Although that additional revenue from nonresidents helps keep resident license fees low, it's still not enough to satisfy many Montana hunters and anglers, who maintain that nonresidents rob them of local hunting and fishing opportunities.

"This is a big state," says Ortez, "and there's no reason local people should have to 'take a number' when it comes to hunting and fishing here."

State officials are listening. For years Montana has restricted nonresidents to just 10 percent of available elk, antelope, and other big game permits and special licenses and has capped the number of nonresident hunting licenses available. Since 2000, the state has reserved the first weekend of Montana's 65-day pheasant hunting season for residents only.

"Any form of economic development, whether it's tourism or industry, will bring more people."

—Tom Power, economics professor, University of Montana

Such restrictions could tighten further, especially on premier trout waters. Resident angler displeasure over crowding on the Beaverhead and Big Hole rivers grew so bad that, beginning in 2001, the FWP Commission reserved boat fishing for residents only on certain stretches during weekends.

Though such restrictions may appease residents, Montana officials know they can lean on visitors only so much. Though nonresident demand for licenses remains high, despite the price increase, it could eventually decline, as it did in Colorado recently following an 80 percent jump in nonresident elk license fees.

"Tourism creates thousands of jobs in Montana," says Smith, the FWP chief of staff. "I certainly understand the concerns of resident hunters and anglers, but we can't afford to be antagonistic to nonresidents when we increasingly rely on them for our economy."

And thus the dilemma: Many Montanans want to see more tourism dollars, but not more tourists. Unfortunately, notes Tom Power, economics professor at the University of Montana, the two come firmly attached. "Any form of economic development, whether it's tourism or industry, will bring more people," Power says. "If you don't want the congestion, you can't have the increase in living standards."

Mobile wealth

Why has Montana become such a popular destination for America's hook-and-bullet crowd? It could simply be a matter of demand chasing supply. Montana still has lots of land, fish, and wildlife available for relatively little money, even considering the recent nonresident license fee hike. Nationwide, hunters and anglers have more disposable income and more time to spend it. Where fishing the Madison River or hunting elk might once have been the trip of a lifetime for out-of-staters, today many make such outings part of their yearly recreational plans.

Mike Gurnett, FWP videographer and onetime fishing guide, contends that the problem is not so much crowding but what he believes is a growing lack of common courtesy among many resident and nonresident hunters and anglers. "You see a lot more rudeness on a river these days," Gurnett says, "and I think it's that, more than anything, that ticks people off."

If true, such changes in behavior may be due to a changing culture—one in which increasingly urbanized people are less reliant on each other and thus have less need for hospitality, manners, and other customs necessary in closely knit rural communities.

Regardless of the cause, it appears that Montana has no monopoly on conflicts over limited natural recreational lands and opportunities.

"This is a national issue," says Tom Palmer, head of FWP's information bureau.

MONTANA OUTDOORS

UNWELCOME MAT: Leased land signs are sprouting up across Montana. Says one Great Falls hunter: "Residents are taking a backseat to nonresidents in this state, and it's not right."

SPARTASPHOTO.COM

FWP searches for solutions

"You can see more of these types of crowding situations on the horizon," says FWP chief of staff Chris Smith. "Unless we find ways to manage recreational use, it's only going to get worse."

Often in the center of storms raging over access and crowding, FWP has taken several steps over the years to find fair and sensible ways to balance the rights of resident and nonresident hunters and anglers:

- Provided more hunting and fishing access for residents and nonresidents through its Block Management and Fishing Access Site programs
- Recently hired a river recreation specialist who will help manage user conflicts
- Instituted a permit lottery system to regulate crowding on the Smith River
- Reserved the first weekend of the 65-day pheasant hunting season for resident hunters only
- Instituted an access rule on the Beaverhead and Big Hole rivers that distributes angling and floating pressure

"I hear about it from other agencies all the time, about pressure on beaches in Connecticut and California, pheasant hunting in South Dakota, and fishing in Louisiana. If a state has something precious, the residents are making sure some of it is reserved for them to enjoy."

Problems in other states in turn send those residents scurrying to places less trammeled. "I travel around the U.S. a lot," says John Barsness, an outdoors writer living in Townsend, "and I think one reason for what we're seeing in Montana is that hunting has been screwed up in other states, which are overpopulated and oversuburbanized. It's the fault of humans in general who all want their little piece of the country and then sprawl out over the countryside."

Some solutions

For its part, Montana FWP has tried to manage conflicts that come from more nonresident use. Its Block Management and Fishing Access Site programs are examples of how the agency provides more hunting and fishing access to both in- and out-of-staters. The recent hiring of a river recreation specialist who will help manage user conflicts indicates how seriously the agency takes this growing issue. FWP has also instituted a permit lottery system that successfully regulates crowding on the popular-yet-pristine Smith River in central Montana. And FWP director Jeff Hagener says that the agency is considering a small hike in resident license fees in the near future that could reduce FWP's reliance on nonresident fees and provide additional funds to address crowding and access problems.

"I think we can find ways for both residents and nonresidents to share the resource."

—Chris Smith, chief of staff Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

But certain socio-economic forces are beyond the agency's purview. Until Montana comes up with its own Silicon Valley or discovers diamonds in the Little Belt Mountains, its economy will continue to depend increasingly on tourist dollars. As for the issue of hunting lands being leased by wealthy outsiders, Meyers notes that "landowners have every right to lease their land, and hunters—both resident and nonresident—have every right to pay to hunt there. So I really don't think there is a clear-cut solution for this."

But maybe it's not inevitable that Montana becomes a big New Jersey with mountains. Maybe FWP and other agencies can find other innovative ways to manage both resident and nonresident recreational growth, just as it led the nation in devising legislation during the 1970s that protected the environment without undue burdens to industry.

"I think we can find ways for residents and nonresidents to share the resource," says Smith, "but it won't come easy. People in- and out-of-state will need to change their attitudes and expectations. And probably most important, there will have to be more tolerance on both sides." ■

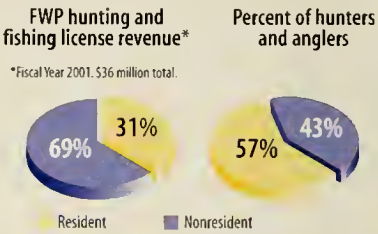
Average Household Income

Montanans make much less: One reason nonresidents pay more for a hunting license, say Montana officials, is because nonresidents earn more.

Source, 2000 median household income, U.S. Census Bureau

Revenue Paid vs. Participation

Nonresidents pay much more: Nonresidents account for more than two-thirds of FWP's license revenue yet make up less than half the total hunting and fishing participants.



Source: Montana FWP

MONTANA OUTDOORS

Montana Outdoors

PORTRAIT

Marten

(Martes Americana)

By John Fraley

JAN L. WASSINK

Also known as the pine marten or American sable, the marten is a house cat–sized member of the weasel family. To Alaska's Koyukon people, the marten is known as *sooga*, or "brother of the wolverine," to which the marten is closely related. The slender but powerful marten moves phenomenally fast in trees, often catching red squirrels after high-speed chases. The nimble predator is common in northern North America, ranging from Alaska and throughout Canada to the Pacific Northwest, Intermountain West, northern Great Lake states, and New England. Similar marten subspecies live in northern Europe and Russia.

Appearance

An adult marten is roughly 20 to 30 inches long and weighs from 1½ to 3 pounds. Males are about one-third larger than females. The furbearer is known for its sharply pointed face, erect ears, and bushy tail. Color varies, but the marten's fine, dense fur is usually light brown on the body and dark brown to black on the tail and legs. A bright orange or yellow patch highlights the throat and breast.

MICHAEL H. FRANCIS

Sound

Marten are shy, and sightings are not common, but if you do spot one it will likely hold its ground. An aggressive predator, the marten makes growling, huffing, and scolding noises when approached by humans. Having spent much time in northwestern Montana forests, I've been fortunate to see many marten over the years. Once I was actually scolded by a marten that seemed to consider the elk quarters I was packing out to be his property.

Food

Marten eat mostly voles and mice—which in winter they capture in snow tunnels—as well as squirrels and snowshoe hares. They also scavenge on deer and elk carcasses during winter and spring. In summer, this voracious predator actually dines on berries for part of its diet.

Reproduction

Marten breed in summer. Courtship can last 15 days, during which the pair wrestles while growling, screaming, and "chuckling" (a sound that biologists consider a mating call). The mating process is unique and violent. The male grabs the female's neck with his teeth and drags her around for 30 minutes or more before copulation, which lasts another hour. The fertilized eggs in the female become inactive through the winter before attaching to the wall of the uterus, where they then develop into a fetus for two months before birth. This is known as delayed implantation. Young (usually three) are born in April, reach adult size by late summer, and reach sexual maturity at about one and a half years.

Habitat

Marten use a variety of forest types. Most are found in denser spruce and fir forests, where downed timber and heavy ground cover support good numbers of voles and mice. Marten use squirrel dens in trees, woodpecker holes, or underground dens.

Status

Marten are on a roll in Montana. They are widely distributed throughout the western part of the state east to the Crazy Mountains, which was their historic distribution. According to Brian Giddings, FWP furbearer coordinator, marten will probably do even better in the future because trees growing after timber harvest in the 1950s and 1960s are now large enough to provide suitable habitat.

Trapping

Giddings says that this popular furbearer is the key species in western Montana mountain trapping and has been attracting more interest in recent years. Trappers take roughly 1,000 marten each year. Pelts are valuable, bringing about $25 to $40 on the fur market. Marten, also known as sable, is one of the finest furs. In the Koyukon culture, the light, warm marten hat is considered the ultimate symbol of good times. The creator of the world, they believe, wore a marten hat. ■

John Fraley, an FWP regional information officer at Kalispell, is a frequent contributor to Montana Outdoors.

Lab Results
Two Labradors show the happy fatigue of a day retrieving ducks. For more gun dog devotion, see page 18.
Photo by Denver Bryan

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